

# **Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women**

## **Lynn Public Hearing REPORT**

*On May 8, 2002,  
the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women  
held its 10th public hearing  
in Lynn, Massachusetts,  
at Girls Incorporated on  
88 Broad Street.*

*The purpose of this hearing was to  
listen to the concerns of  
women, girls, and organizations in Northern Massachusetts.*

*The Commission hopes that the  
comments, feedback, and input of the participants  
will help us focus on some of the most pressing concerns  
facing women and girls in our state.*

### **Attendees**

#### **Commissioners**

Elaine Guiney, Vice Chair  
Frances Hogan  
Dianne Luby

#### **Elected Officials**

Edward J. Clancy, Mayor of Lynn  
Deborah Smith Walsh, Councilor at Large

#### **Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women Staff**

Priscilla Golding, Executive Director  
Paula Daddona, Program Coordinator  
Sonia Shah, Administrative Assistant

#### **Participants from the Community**

Alandra, Girls Inc.  
Shanel Anderson, Girls Inc.  
Shyra Anderson, Girls Inc.  
Tamar Ayrikyan, Girls Inc.  
Cheinna Bennett, Girls Inc.  
Marsha Billias, Girls Inc.  
Priscilla Brea, Girls Inc.  
Elizabeth Cohen  
Dava Davainis, MSPCC Healthy Families  
Christine Dennison  
Sherri Dodge, Girls Inc.  
Patricia Driscoll, Girls Inc.  
O'Neill Emmanuel, MSPCC  
Gina Field  
Crystal Ford, Girls Inc.  
Alice Furman, Girls Inc.  
Sarah Furman, Girls Inc.  
Marianne Gauthier, Beverly High School Women's Association  
Jesenia Gervacio, Girls Inc.  
Rose Gould, Girls Inc.  
Tamarah Gourgue, Girls Inc.  
Virginia Graves, Double Sunrise  
Nancy Hamlin, Health Link  
Heidi Henson, City of Peabody

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### **Participants from the Community, Continued**

Jenny Hernandez, Girls Inc.  
Margie Herrick, Girls Inc.  
Jessika Irwin, Girls Inc.  
Sokhom Khoeun, Girls Inc.  
Cait Laracy, Beverly High School Women's Association  
Martine Laurent, Girls Inc.  
Cassandra LeGault, Girls Inc.  
Lourdes Lopez, Girls Inc.  
Deborah A. Lovas, Girl Scouts  
Chrystelle Lukanda, Girls Inc.  
Laetitia Lukanda, Girls Inc.  
Haillie MacNeill, Beverly High School Women's Association  
Sheila Mathieu, Girls Inc.  
Dustin McDonald, Girls Inc.  
Diane Mears, LEO  
Stacey Noel, Girls Inc.  
Sonia Pena, Help for Abused Women and Children  
Erga Pierrette, Board of Trustees, Salem State College  
Sarah Risher  
Mary-Ann Roberts, Girls Inc.  
Kellie Rowe, Girls Inc.  
Jamie Sabino, Boston Trial Court  
Tanya Santiago, Girls Inc.  
Esmeralda Sanfour, Beverly High School Women's Association  
Wendy Spalinger  
Carrie Stack, Lynn Youth Neighborhood Coalition  
Sue Staples, Help for Abused Women and Children  
Joy Sumberg, Girls Inc.  
Azilde Tavaréz, Girls Inc.  
Victoria Tavaréz, Girls Inc.  
Cory Thibodeau, Girls Inc.  
Kari Whitney, Help for Abused Women and Children  
Anthony Witwicki, Beverly High School Women's Association  
Abbie Zubiel, Beverly High School Women's Association

## **Opening Remarks**

### **Welcome and Introduction**

Commissioners Elaine Guiney and Fran Hogan introduced themselves and welcomed everyone to the hearing. Commissioner Guiney is the Vice Chair of the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women (MCSW). She noted that MCSW conducts four public hearings a year throughout the state to gather information on the concerns of women and girls.

Commissioner Fran Hogan is the Chair of MCSW's Legislative Subcommittee. She is an attorney at a law firm in Boston where she specializes in affordable housing and community economic development issues. She expressed her great interest in helping women who live at the fringes of society.

The Commissioners introduced Priscilla Golding the Executive Director of MCSW, and Paula Daddona, the Program Coordinator. They then thanked Patricia Driscoll, the Executive Director of Girls Inc., and her staff for hosting the hearing.

Commissioner Guiney introduced Mayor Clancy and Deborah Smith-Walsh, a City Councilor at Large, who opened the meeting.

### **Summary of Testimony**

*The following summaries are based on note-takers at the meeting, staff transcribing the audiocassette recording of the testimony, and written testimony provided by those who did not speak.*

#### **Edward J. Clancy, Mayor of Lynn**

Mayor Clancy introduced himself and welcomed the Commission to the City of Lynn. He commended Girls Inc. for providing a constructive forum where girls could express their concerns and discuss solutions. He explained that he had recently attended a Girls Inc. function where he was asked to consider the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test. He said he was impressed by the enlightening and spirited discussion he had with the girls on this matter. He thanked Girls Inc. for supporting girls in a positive way.

Mayor Clancy then introduced Deborah Smith-Walsh and noted that there is no better role model or advocate for girls than Deborah. He said that Smith-Walsh has been a hard-working Lynn School Committee member for years and is currently a Lynn City Councilor at Large.

#### **Deborah Smith-Walsh, City Councilor at Large**

Ms. Smith-Walsh welcomed the participants to Lynn and invited them to visit Girls Inc. at a later time to find out more information on the programs offered. The Councilor noted that one of the important aspects of Girls. Inc is that they have specialized programs for girls ranging from elementary school programs to teen programs.

### *Commissioner Follow-up*

Commissioner Guiney explained the purpose of the hearing, saying that the MCSW uses the information gathered from testimonies to define the Commission's priorities for the year. This year's priorities are domestic violence and childcare. The commission provides the testimony transcripts to all members of the state legislature and to local officials. The MCSW then makes recommendations for legislation and acts as an advocate for these proposals.

Guiney expressed the importance of community participation in the hearings and noted that anyone who does not wish to speak publicly may instead write the commission.

### **Carrie Stack, *Lynn Youth Neighborhood Coalition***

Ms. Stack voiced concern that pregnancy prevention programs are seen as non-essential services that are usually the first programs cut when there is a fiscal crisis. She is particularly concerned about the negative effects of this year's budget cuts on prevention programs. Stack noted that when services and organizations are cut, young people struggling with teen pregnancy, drug addiction, and gang violence will have no place to get help and will suffer the most.

### **Keri Whitney, *Hope for Abused Women and Children***

Ms. Whitney stated her concern about the prevalence of dating violence in teen relationships. She cited a Youth Risk Behavior study that showed that one in five adolescent girls in Massachusetts suffer from physical or sexual abuse at the hands of a dating partner. Ms. Whitney noted that young girls must learn empowerment skills. While schools provide education in math, science, and English, and prepare for students for the MCAs test, schools are not providing sufficient education about rape and sexual assault. One serious problem Whitney has noticed among young people is that they do not understand the concept of date rape.

### **Sonia Pena, *Hope for Abused Women and Children***

Ms. Pena spoke about the ways budget cuts effect the programs that serve women and girls. She focused on the effects of cuts in the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and Department of Social Services (DSS) and noted that when these programs are cut, there are more women and children who are desperate. Ms. Pena expressed concern about having even less resources to serve more people, particularly battered women.

### **Esmeralda Sanfour, *Student, Beverly High School***

Ms. Sanfour voiced concern about the effects of budget cuts on essential programs. She spoke about the elimination of the peer education program from her high school. The program educated students about STDs, pregnancy, and contraception. It is unclear if the program was eliminated because of budget cuts or because of its controversial content.

**Sue Staples, *Hope for Abused Women and Children***

Ms. Staples said that preventing violence against women should continue to be a priority issue. She noted that three women have been killed in the North Shore as a result of domestic violence during a three-week period.

She also discussed the importance of prevention programs. Hope for Abused Women and Children runs eight support groups for teenagers in Lynn. These support groups, consisting of a diverse mix of teenagers, helps teens learn about healthy relationships through discussion with one another. These programs might be cut if the Department of Education loses money or if health classes are cut from schools. Currently, there are only two prevention educators serving twenty-two communities in the area. She expressed concern about this short supply of community resources.

**Nancy Hamlin, *Health Link***

Ms. Hamlin works with a North Shore organization seeking to clean up the environment and educate the public about pollution. She expressed concern about the scarcity of information available to young women about nutrition. She applauded Governor Jane Swift for passing a law that made it mandatory for doctors to tell pregnant women about the danger of eating seafood while pregnant. Fish and other marine animals often have toxins in their bodies from environmental pollution and these toxins can be passed on to people who eat them. One particular danger is the presence of mercury in many species of fish, including tuna. Most people are unaware of the dangers of eating contaminated fish, but ingesting too much mercury can cause neurological problems and learning disabilities. She noted that young women should be educated about environmental hazards and the effects of the environment on their bodies.

Hamlin also expressed concern about the effects of power plants on the environment. She mentioned the Salem Power Plant, which has been linked to mercury pollution in Salem that may have caused many premature deaths in the area. She thanked Dr. Harrington of Salem State College for involving young people in cleaning up the environment and noted the importance of involving more young people in Earth Day activities.

**Patricia Driscoll, *Girls Inc.***

Ms. Driscoll explained that the mission of the Girls Inc. is to prepare girls to be responsible, confident, and economically independent young women. Girls Inc. believes strongly in the importance of safe-spaces for girls and in spaces that are specifically for girls.

The board of Girls Inc. recently sent a letter to Governor Swift and other state leaders expressing the board's top two concerns for girls in Massachusetts. The first concern is the lack of quality after-school programs. She explained that half of the Lynn public schools have a 1:45pm dismissal time and the other half have a 2:15pm

dismissal time, meaning that many children are home without a parent for hours each day. A significant number of these children live with single parents who cannot afford the high cost of childcare services. She emphasized that there is an enormous need for subsidized child-care and for maintaining after-school programs where young people can interact with adults who help them academically and who design exciting and creative activities.

The board's second concern is the lack of prevention programs. Ms. Driscoll noted that pregnancy prevention programs help girls to make good decisions by giving them opportunities to role-play situations before these situations actually occur. Another benefit of the programs is that they employ teenagers and provide them with job training programs where they can learn to become peer educators and peer leaders. A position with a prevention program offers teens the opportunity to develop important research and teaching skills that they can use in the future.

**Anthony Witwicki, *Teacher, Beverly High School***

Mr. Witwicki expressed his desire to understand the problems that the young women in his school face. He explained that while the school community is trying to respond to these young women's needs, it is having a difficult time defining these needs, let alone create the necessary prevention programs to help the girls. One of his observations is that many girls begin to suffer from a poor body image at a young age; this can lead to difficulty in relationships, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression later on in life.

**Jessica Irwin, *High school student***

Ms. Irwin has been involved in Girls Inc. since middle school when she joined a Girls Inc. after-school program. She said that working with Girls Inc. has been beneficial for her and her community.

**Virginia Beal**

Ms. Beal recounted her difficult experiences growing up as a woman with learning disabilities in the 70s. After failing at seven different co-educational colleges, she was encouraged to attend a women's college. She finally decided to attend Smith College where she felt supported by the strength of the women around her and was able to graduate in four years. She feels that women-friendly organizations and services can provide the support a woman needs to be successful. She praised Girls Inc. for its work serving young women.

**Christina Dennison, *City of Boston Community Center***

Ms. Dennison attended a peer education program at Girls Inc. during high school and explained how the lessons she learned in the program helped her to become a successful adult. She currently runs a girls after-school program for the City of Boston Community Center. She considers her peer education work at Girls Inc. to be the start of her career helping women through social services.

**Virginia Graves, *Nurse Practitioner***

Ms. Graves is a nurse practitioner who works exclusively with young women between the ages of nine and twenty-five. She also maintains a website, [www.youngwomenshealth.com](http://www.youngwomenshealth.com), which provides health information to girls and their parents. Graves said that some of the toughest problems her patients face include eating disorders, depression, and sexual assault. She is hopeful that girls can overcome these problems with the help of supportive adults and organizations like Girls Inc. She explained that studies conducted at Wellesley and the Stone Center show that for girls to grow into healthy women, they need to connect with healthy women, to participate in healthy relationships, and to be supported by a healthy community. She concluded by applauding Girls Inc. for being a national and local leader in girls' advocacy.

**Nancy Hamlin, *Health Link***

Ms. Hamlin emphasized the importance of parents taking an active role in prevention. She also advocated for increasing the salaries of child-care workers and for equal pay for women in the workplace.

**Victoria Tavarez, Azilde Tavarea, Jenny Hernandez, and Sherri Dodge  
*Activision***

These teenage girls spoke about their group, Activision, a peer education and theater group consisting of ten peer educators. The group is dedicated to raising awareness of issues like sexual harassment and domestic violence. They also participate in volunteer projects including helping with Earth Day clean up and marching during an event to stop violence. They applauded Girls Inc. for encouraging girls to be confident and challenge themselves.

**Sherry Dodge**

Ms. Dodge also applauded Girls Inc. for its work in the community. She noted that Girls Inc. gives young women the power to speak out and instills in them the belief that they can reach their goals. Dodge explained that though some students perceive Girls Inc. as simply an after-school hangout, it is actually a place where young women can learn a lot from each other.

**Youth Board Member**

A youth board member appreciated the Commission's willingness to listen to the opinions of young people.

**Cory Thibodeau, *Girls Inc.***

Mr. Thibodeau is a member of the Friends Rally to End Smoking Habit Program and he educates the young women of Girls Inc. about the harmful effects of smoking. He noted that it is a challenge being part of an all-girl environment but



he feels that Girls Inc. provides an important after-school service and he is happy to be a part of it.

### **Closing Remarks**

The Commissioners thanked everyone for attending and adjourned the hearing.

### **Issue Boards**

*During the meeting, participants were invited to write anonymous comments on post-it notes and stick them to the appropriate Issue Board during the hearing. The topics covered by the Issue Boards were: Child Care, Economic Development/Stability, Girls' Issues, Health Care, Violence Against Women, and Other.*

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#### **Child Care**

- Improve childcare so that women will have the opportunity to pursue a career.

#### **Economic Development/Stability**

- Women gaining respect in the workplace.

#### **Girls' Issues**

- Anorexia/Bulimia
- Self-image
- Teaching girls to develop their own standards of what real beauty is and not conforming to what society sets as standards.
- Educating girls on various issues, ex. Depression among girls.
- More should be done when a school knows of an abusive relationship. Parents should be contacted; the victim should be protected.
- Respect themselves and know that they are more than just a body.
- More high school women's groups to help girls.
- Violence against women and girls.
- What is being done about girls' issues?
- More guest speakers on women's issues.
- Self-respect
- Teaching girls to make their own choices instead of being dominated by their boyfriends.
- Abusive relationships
- Teaching girls to be less dependent on men, more dependent on themselves.

#### **Violence Against Women**

- There should be more places for abused women and children to go. There is only one place in the area for this and it's already over crowded! Why is that?
- An awareness when a relationship gets abusive \*warning signs.
- What do you plan to do about this?

**Other**

- ⇒ More oversight is needed to ensure that applicants are treated fairly. I've had awful experiences in my search for housing. I've been quite fortunate to be aware of my rights but what about the ones who aren't? I can be reached (617) 821-2273 to give details for clarity pertaining to this issue.- Erga P.
- ⇒ I believe that there is a lot of teen pregnancy in Lynn and I think that's a problem.